



Tasmania College of the Arts

University of Tasmania

HONOURS RESEARCH EXEGESIS

PLUG AND PLAY CAPABLE:

GRINDING THROUGH THE GAY LOVE/LUST GAMES OF THE DATA GENERATION

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Sculpture

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Declaration

This exegesis contains to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made to the appropriate persons, nor does the exegesis contain any material that infringes intellectual or moral property or copyright.

Signed –

Dated –

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Acknowledgement to Country

This project was carried out in nipaluna, the country of the muwinina people.

I acknowledge the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community as the rightful owners and continuing custodians of this land, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Content Warning

This exegesis contains sexual concepts, language and contextual profanities. Some readers may find this exegesis and/or the thesis it discusses offensive.

Welcome

This project stems from the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. For richer or poorer, for better or worse, in the twilight of the year 2016, I found myself faced with renegotiating the online dating industry. It seemed my partner-at-the-time and I had dropped each other's balls. Apparently more plug-and-play capable than me, he had already found another set to play with, while I was shocked, confronted, and instantaneously addicted to the digital meat-market.¹ I loathed, yet relished, the growth of my relationship with the gay online dating world and its commodification of bodies: my pound of flesh packaged up and shelved in delicatessen isle among the rest, to be bought, sold – or both. But at what cost to me? And at what cost to them?

To commence processing the autobiographical experience of 'Grinding' my way through same-sex male-oriented online dating, hook-ups and ubiquitous technology-assisted social-meet applications, I began examining the language of Grindr, Tinder, Bumble, Squirt, Scruff, Gaydar, Manhunt. I found the abundance of metaphors, double entendres, analogies, covert and overt sexualisms and 'coded' language to be fascinating. A rich playground of colloquial signs and signifiers, this language has largely replaced the face-to-face culture of cruising, beats, and underground systems of body-language prevalent in the recent past.

¹ Plug and Play (Adj.): 'Denoting or relating to software or devices that are intended to work perfectly when first used or connected, without reconfiguration or adjustment by the user.' *Oxford Dictionary of English*, viewed 26 March 2018.
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/plug_and_play

During Semester 1, I worked to develop my own language of sexualised and/or queer objects, which formed a family of 26 forms, aligning to the five vowels and 21 consonants of the English alphabet. However, the forms evaded any definite association with a single letter. The resulting 'code' was thus nebulous, open to subjective reader-specific interpretations and misinterpretations alike. Caught in a situation of feeling unable to decode my own coded systems, I instead turned to consider the games played within and between the users' profiles.

Focussing on the popular global gay hook-up application, Grindr, I logged on every morning to souvenir a random profile from somewhere around the world that either appealed or repelled my personal sense of *jouissance*.² Grindr is a space of self-advertisement in the hope of finding lustful sex and/or love, friends, friends-with-benefits, fidelity, infidelity, expanded personal networks, a feeling of inclusion/community, shared fetishes or desires, or maybe all of these. For users who 'may be socially or geographically isolated, or for those who are "coming out" or exploring their sexuality', hook-up/dating applications provide 'a "visibly" queer space and the opportunity to connect with other gay men (while also retaining anonymity if they so choose)'.³ Although, 'we must also recognise that some men

² Launched in 2009, Grindr comprises a mobile application providing location-based interaction and chat options for users. Based in California, Grindr is a subsidiary of Kunlun Group Limited, itself a subsidiary of Beijing Kunlun Tech Co. According to Grindr marketing, the application 'has grown into the largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people' with 'millions of daily users who use our location-based technology in almost every country in every corner of the planet.' It claims to 'proudly' represent 'a modern LGBTQ lifestyle...' that is 'continuing to blaze innovative paths with a meaningful impact for our community.'

Grindr (2018) 'About', *Grindr.com*, viewed 22 March 2018. <https://www.grindr.com/about/>

³ Murphy, D, and National Centre in HIV Social Research (Australia) (2004), *Cruising and connecting online: the use of internet chat sites by gay men in Sydney and Melbourne*, National Centre for HIV Social Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney, p.41.

will feel excluded by the dominant culture and values expressed there (such as those extolling youth, beauty and sexual prowess)'.⁴ The meat-market, therefore, can be a space of positive self-investigation and identity-exploration, yet it can also be a space of stereotype reinforcement and discrimination.

Through my engagement with Grindr over the course of this year, I have developed the following questions to keep in mind. As a user, how do I negotiate the space and interactions within? What interactions am I willing to share, and which am I not? When sharing, how do I make sense of my commodification within the meat-market? As a commodity, what is my experience of the relationship games? These questions are the horizons of my project, and while not always apparent in the thesis and exegesis they are still the peripheries that have informed my thinking and project outcomes.

Psychologically, my primary method for processing confrontation, awkwardness and the feeling of ill-fitting is to create parody. I aim to engage myself, and hopefully 'the opposition' (you), in laughter, softening the situation and making the heavy-weight light-hearted. I negotiate the online hook-up/dating application, Grindr, as a space filled with metaphorical games. The overarching narrative is segmented into consumable, individually flavoured chunks. Like the four movements of a traditional classical symphony, or four types of sausage cooked on the same barbeque. It is structured in the format of a symphonic barbeque.

⁴ Murphy, D, and National Centre in HIV Social Research (Australia) (2004), *Cruising and connecting online: the use of internet chat sites by gay men in Sydney and Melbourne*, p.41.

Hence, this visual, autobiographically driven investigation into my interpretation of the gay love/lust games of the data generation stews with analogy and metaphor, parody and double-meaning. *Movement 1: The Meetmarket* (Pork Sausage) is the project's introduction. This is the meat/meet-market of commercialised body commodity. *Movement 2: Tag, You're It* (Lamb Sausage) represents the honeymoon-period frolic. *Movement 3: The Telephone Game* (Blood Sausage) erupts into an absurdly serious or seriously absurd game of chess, in which communication is clouded by the very members at play. *Movement 4: Hot Potato* (the everyday supermarket sausage) settles into the routine of potential longevity.

Movement 1: The Meetmarket

(Pork Sausage)

Imagine yourself visiting your local multinational supermarket, Woolworths or Coles, or a smaller independent grocer. Sooner or later during your shop, you will inevitably pass through the pre-packaged meat isle or near to the unpackaged 'fresh' meats delicatessen. This is the meeting place of the world's meats. Here, each cut, each seasoned, aged, cured, organic, genetically enhanced, simple, elaborate, farmed or free-range piece of flesh bumps cartons with its neighbours. Containing rows of organised meats, the sleek chiller display cabinets glow and hum. They appear sterile and clean yet are littered with the prints of numerous fingerings. These cabinets, merely a framework, recede from our conscious awareness. We catch ourselves reflected in the mirror of chrome-like stainless steel. I observe the meat before me while you 'perv' on the 'meat' beside you.⁵ What is the difference between my flesh and his flesh, your flesh and that flesh? We are all a commodity: a body-commodity.

This situation is rife in *Movement 1: The Meetmarket*. Approaching the exhibition space, viewers encounter an unimposingly proportioned white display cabinet. It is only 110cm high, 90cm wide, 45cm deep, and rests atop four generic caster wheels. Three inclined shelves sit centrally in the cabinet, with a false air-cooling system vent cut into the cabinets lower front face. A mirrored faceplate sits above the

⁵ Perv (Verb): to 'gaze lustfully or lecherously'. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, viewed 26 March 2018. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/perv>

shelves, silently screaming 'MEET' in a bland sans-serif hollow-form font. On top of the cabinet perches a supermarket-style advertisement swing-sign, above which hangs a single rectangular wayfinding lamp that reads 'MEAT' around its four mirror-acrylic facets.

The three shelves and the wayfinding lamp glow hot with LED illumination – perhaps the first signal for viewers that something with this scene is 'non-normative'.⁶ If this was a 'normative' supermarket display cabinet, it would glow with a cold light that did not suggest increased blood flow and perspiration, the natural human bodily functions due to raised temperatures. Subconsciously, cold implies cleanliness; heat facilitates dirtiness. Hence the hot light seems at odds with what appears to be large rectangular slabs of meat housed within thirteen black polystyrene shrink-wrapped trays.

Arrayed over the three shelves each tray contains a paperback publication resting on black food-grade soaker pads. The publication's cover depicts the richly marbled juicy red flesh, and to complete the package, each publication's plastic shrink-wrap is adorned with a price-by-weight product label placed in the lower right corner. The product label replicates Woolworths branding, while the advertisement swing-sign replicates Coles branding. These two mega-retailers were chosen as the

⁶ I choose to engage the terms 'non-normative' and 'normative' in reference to the socially constructed binary perceived to exist between 'heteronormativity' and queerness, where the former is perceived as natural and the latter as unnatural. For an expanded discussion of heterosexism, heteronormativity and their problematisation in contemporary society through a medical lens, see Kitzinger, C (2005), 'Heteronormativity in Action: Reproducing the Heterosexual Nuclear Family in After-hours Medical Calls', *Social Problems*, Volume 52, Issue 4, 1 November 2005, pp.477–498, viewed 2 July 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2005.52.4.477>

models for the artwork's brand formation, not only due to their ubiquity in Australian society, but also as they have long represented, funded, and controlled a majority share of the Australian consumer marketplace for groceries and foodstuffs.⁷ Get some pork on your fork; it'll do you good.⁸

The publication is the centre-piece of *Movement 1: The Meetmarket*. It is a Pandora's jar. While the concept of the supermarket aligns with the colloquial meat-market of the online dating/hook-up industry, the publication denotes the male-orientated mobile application, Grindr. The publication's plastic housing thus resembles the Apple Store or Google Play Store – the two dominant global application marketplaces.⁹ Congratulations, you have 'located' the meat-market: the contemporary meeting place for individuals to find physical and emotional contact. However, the shrink-wrapping is a barrier, a stop-gap, a stanza in a piece of music, a place to give pause, the membrane which separates the pork from the barbeque hotplate. Just as you must decide to download and dock an application on your mobile phone, so too there is a similar decision to be made as you contemplate the plastic wrap. Will you rupture it or not? As with any space of decision-making throughout life, once knowledge is gained, it is often impossible to

⁷ See Mortimer, G (2013), 'FactCheck: do Coles and Woolies control 80% of the market?', *TheConversation.com*, 7 July 2013 5.46pm AEST, viewed 13 October 2018. <https://theconversation.com/factcheck-do-coles-and-woolies-control-80-of-the-market-15418>

⁸ Riffing on the sexualised double-entendres employed within Australian Pork television advertisements in recent years, encouraging the consumption of pork meats. For the 'Sunday Lunch' advertisement, see 'More "Pork on your fork" double entendres in new commercial airing this weekend via Shift, Sydney', *CampaignBrief.com*, 6 February 2012 5.45pm, viewed 13 October 2018. <http://www.campaignbrief.com/2012/02/more-pork-on-your-fork-double.html>

⁹ See popular blogger Master of Code Global's 'App Store vs Google Play: Stores in Numbers', *Medium.com*, 24 May 2017, viewed 15 October 2018. <https://medium.com/master-of-code-global/app-store-vs-google-play-stores-in-numbers-fd5ba020c195>

regain innocence. The publications are made available for purchase throughout their exhibition, and if purchased, the purchaser assumes responsibility and liability for the contents. Like pricking the sausage's membrane, getting 'deflowered', or formulating a personal profile within a dating/hook-up application, the contents of the publication are concurrently consumed and compromised.¹⁰ Once a publication is opened, its status as an original artwork is de-authenticated and devalued.

However, as serious, confrontational, contemplative and potential-laden as the online dating/hook-up industry is for different users, it is also a sex-first space of hypersexualised body-commodity, lust, easy promiscuity.¹¹ At the commencement of the project I approached my place within Grindr's body-commodification feeling like a sell-out. It raised memories of visiting the Gallery of Modern Art's *Andy Warhol* retrospective in Brisbane in 2007. While Warhol's career artmaking practice and lifestyle were built upon notions of commodification and commerciality, I nevertheless felt the exhibition cheapened by the final room – a literal store, where all manner of cheaply produced Warhol replicas could be purchased on the spot by any visitor. I bought the catalogue, not a plastic ready-made.¹² Entering the meat-market I felt cheapened. I felt I had crafted my profile, and in so doing, sold out.

¹⁰Deflower (Verb): to 'deprive (a woman) of her virginity'. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, viewed 26 March 2018. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/deflower>

¹¹ For an Australian-specific text charting the social shifts from face-to-face engagements to the data-sphere of online hook-ups and dating, see Reynolds, R, and Robinson, S (2016), *Gay & lesbian, then & now: Australian stories from a social revolution*, Black Inc., an imprint of Schwartz Publishing Pty Ltd, Carlton VIC, Australia. For an analysis of Grindr culture specifically, see Turban, J (2018), 'We need to talk about how Grindr is affecting gay men's mental health', *Vox*, 4 April 2018, viewed 10 April 2018. <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/4/4/17177058/grindr-gay-men-mental-health-psychiatrist>

¹² See exhibition catalogue Warhol, A, Brophy, P, Queensland Art Gallery, Andy Warhol Museum, and Gallery of Modern Art (2007), *Andy Warhol*, Queensland Art Gallery; Pittsburg, Penn.: in association with the Andy Warhol Museum, South Brisbane

Like a t-shirt in Anastasia Klose's *One stop knock-off shop* (2013-14), I was a pirated copy of myself.¹³ I felt (I feel) pressured to reshape my identity to that of someone stereotypical – someone more attractive and desirable – to fit into and seek personal gain from the economy of the body-commodity marketplace, 'broadening my audience and creating a stronger brand'.¹⁴ Do I rate myself as a '-\$\$\$' or a '\$\$\$'?¹⁵

Despite the game-play, my profile – like the numerous others tiled around me in Grindr's geolocational interface – strips my soul bare. *Movement 1: The Meetmarket* is an artwork housing optimistic potentiality within a 'variable ratio reinforcement' framework of forever-hopeful futility and uncertainty.¹⁶ Some users find what they seek and join the league of the lucky; some decide to get a puppy.¹⁷ Yet, as photographer Nan Goldin comments, 'there is an intense need for coupling in spite of it all ... It's a biochemical reaction'.¹⁸

¹³ See Edmond, M, and Klose, A (2014), 'Anastasia Klose Interview | Melbourne Now @ NGV', *PRIMER*, 9 January 2014, viewed 14 June 2018. <http://primermag.net/art/2014/1/anastasia-klose-interview-melbourne-now-ngv>

¹⁴ Edmond, M, and Klose, A (2014), 'Anastasia Klose Interview | Melbourne Now @ NGV', *PRIMER*, 9 January 2014

¹⁵ Edmond, M, and Klose, A (2014), 'Anastasia Klose Interview | Melbourne Now @ NGV', *PRIMER*

¹⁶ Turban, J (2018), 'We need to talk about how Grindr is affecting gay men's mental health', *Vox*, 4 April 2018.

¹⁷ In a comedic short dance by New York based choreographer Al Blackstone shown at the Fire Island Dance Festival 2015, the lead dancer decides to get a puppy as companion rather than negotiate the antics of Grindr and men. See Blackstone, A (2015), 'Not For Me', *YouTube.com*, 27 August 2015, viewed 19 November 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAFaGTyPPhg>

¹⁸ Goldin, N, Holborn, M, Fletcher, S and Heiferman, M (1989), *The ballad of sexual dependency*, Aperture Foundation, New York. p.7.

Movement 2: Tag, You're It

(Lamb Sausage)

Assume the meat-market's variable ratio reinforcement has coughed up some luck, and you've organised to meet some meat; that last dollar in the pokies has hit a jackpot; that last screen refresh has loaded a profile that appears to have come up with some goods. But what of the payout? Will any sparks ignite a passionate flame, or will the party sparkler run out of fuel and fizzle on its stick? The fresh little lamb sausage could be juicy and tender, yet it could also be mutton in disguise. This is *Movement 2: Tag, You're It*. Following *Movement 1: The Meetmarket*, the second work represents the fast-paced swift-footed prowess-laden honeymoon period that could be the beginning of a fruitful relationship or a simple no-strings-attached encounter.

Approaching the artwork, viewers find three elements to the piece. There is a miniature white picket fence that borders a three-by-four-metre space, with a tall 'carport' plinth.¹⁹ The picket fence has been laser-cut from a white card stock of varying lengths, creating a homogenous patchwork of picket sections to become the complete border. This picket fence, an intensely loaded icon in colonial Australian social and cultural history, stands proudly and on guard. It does not directly represent a 'white picket fence view of history that minimises women,

¹⁹ Carport (Noun): 'A shelter for a car consisting of a roof supported on posts, built beside a house', *Oxford Dictionary of English*, viewed 16 September 2018.
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/carport>

Aborigines and other minority groups'.²⁰ It is not directly the mythologisation of minoritising 'culturally prescribed forms of identity through the juxtaposition of allegorical figures with contemporary social roles', to which Australian-born Indian-Malaysian artist, Sangeeta Sandrasegar, alluded in her exhibition *White Picket Fences in the Clear Light of Day Cast Black Lines* (2009). It is not directly a feminist or domestic concern, like curator Sylvia Carr's interpretation of the icon in *Beyond the picket fence* (1995), the first exhibition of women's art to be shown at the National Library of Australia.²¹ To me, it is none, yet a little, of all these things.

Growing up in a geographically rural area of now-white Australia – New South Wales farming country – the traditional land of the Kamilaroi people – the picket fence, irrespective of its colour, although most commonly white, seemed to me to be a lines and rows of phalli. This was the masculine, the patriarchy, the man. A chastity fence. As a queer-identifying teenager, regardless of a home's actual occupants, I interpreted the pickets as the man of the house showing me his dick, while at the same time the pickets protected 'him' from my sight. The phalli-line was as equally to make me feel inadequate as it was to keep his secret; I could only imagine what was in his pants by the size of the picket with which he chose to border his property. I was the dog on the outside, sniffing along the line of scent left by the dog kept inside.

²⁰ Reynolds, H, quoted by McKenna, Dr M (1997), *Different Perspectives on Black Armband History*, Politics and Public Administration Group, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, viewed 12 August 2018. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05

²¹ Carr, S, and National Library of Australia (1995), *Beyond the picket fence: Australian women's art in the National Library's collection*, National Library of Australia, Canberra

Positioned centrally in the shorter side of *Movement 2: Tag, You're It*, the carport is also laser-cut and picketed around the three external sides; the fourth, which faces into the compound, is open. There is no gate to the space; the compound is secure. The floor of the carport reads 'LEFT' and 'RIGHT' in the same bland sans-serif font utilised in *Movement 1: The Meetmarket*. Atop the carport sits two controllers for remote-control toy cars, illuminated with a slight warm LED radiance from beneath. This warm light is stronger below the carport's ceiling, the LED light glowing like a beacon left on in readiness to receive you home at the end of the day. But is it really a beacon? Or a siren calling you to drift upon the rocks? Is it promising the caress of companionship and safety? Or does the light burn with emotional ruin? Approach with glee and trepidation. In any case, as viewers, you and I stand on the outside of the carport and picket fence. We can't get into this man's personal space, let alone his 'tighty-whities'.²² We are now active participants in the game played by the two phalli-adorned peacock-laced miniature mardi gras floats carrying a pair of porcelain stiletto boots. Taking hold of a controller, you play with the left foot on one; I play with the right on the other. I danced in these boots in the clubs of Sydney's Oxford Street. Now it is your turn to dance with me. To steal the words of Paul Mathieu, describing the work of ceramist Jeanne Quinn in his seminal text *Sex pots: eroticism in ceramics*, 'while there is a direct and clear reference to use and function [i.e. of the boots], the context "promotes meaning over use", by speaking about gender and sexuality and, sexual

²² Tighty-whities (Noun): 'slang: snug white underpants for men: white briefs', *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, viewed 15 September 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tighty-whities>

identity'.²³ Intended to define Quinn's queer teawares, Mathieu's insightful comment also shapes the boots as an expression of gender and sexual freedom. The boots thus function as provocateurs regarding our perceptions of self-identity.

Built of paper, card, foam-core, cheap Chinese remote-control cars, zip-ties and MDF whitecoat, the floats that carry their precious Imperial Porcelain boots are made for a day. Made for the passion of the moment, the plug-and-play mentality. Yet they are also more resilient than expected. Goldin states that in her photographs, 'the solitary male is shown with his tenderness and vulnerable sexuality, but when men are together, they become tougher.'²⁴ She continues, 'there is a competitive, erotic, gaming situation displayed through fighting, drinking, proving their ability to withstand pain.'²⁵ These boots on their floats are the same: tender and vulnerable, erotic, competitive and fragile. Watching audience members closely during a trial installation of *Movement 2: Tag' You're It*, I noticed that if one viewer plays with a boot alone, it is a game quickly abandoned. This would seem to be like a time spent trawling the meat-market with only ghostings to show for it.²⁶ However, if two people – previous acquaintances or not – played with the boots together, then it was likely a conversation began as well. One boot moving was boring; two boots dancing was fun. One foot moving alone is awkward, whereas two feet moving have the potential to go somewhere together.

²³ Mathieu, P (2003), *Sex pots: eroticism in ceramics*, A & C Black, London. p.175.

²⁴ Goldin, N, Holborn, M, Fletcher, S and Heiferman, M (1989), *The ballad of sexual dependency*. pp.7-8.

²⁵ Goldin, N, Holborn, M, Fletcher, S and Heiferman, M (1989). p.8.

²⁶ Ghosting (Noun): 'The practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication', *Oxford Dictionary of English*, viewed 15 September 2018. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ghosting>

Above the white picket fenced compound and mardi gras floated boots, a second single feature lamp shines perpetually, like the lamp of *Movement 1: The Meetmarket*. This lamp is more akin to the sun, as it generates actual heat, warming the floor and the dancing or resting boots below with the radiant glow of the halogen spotlight inside. Around the base of the light-shade, bordering the light, is the same phallic peacock lace used on the mardi gras floats. Squinting to look at it directly, to see the penis pattern, reminds me of Max Dupain's *Sunbaker* (1937). Dupain remarks that, 'modern photography must do more than entertain, it must incite thought and by its clear statements of actuality, cultivate a sympathetic understanding of men and women and the life they create and live'.²⁷ Staring at the silhouetted phalli of the lamp-shade lace is like staring at the high-contrast sun-drenched man's shoulders and arms in Dupain's image. As Dupain incites me to imagine the rest of the body beneath the muscular shoulders, I incite you to project the phalli onto your favourite commodified-body flavours. Yet in contrast to Dupain's position of clarity and actuality, the lamp's light is too bright for the lace to be clear and lace itself is a veil. Rather than being sympathetic to cultivating understanding, suburban lace holds the function of hiding the titillated residents of my youth, as my crush and I held hands outside the pickets on the street-edge. As if the lace is one-way glass, the residents of my youth remained safe and unseen, while we – my date and I – felt simultaneously judged and exhilarated under the panopticon of their gaze.

²⁷ Dupain, M, and Missingham, H (1948), *Max Dupain photographs: introduction*, Ure Smith Pty. Limited, Sydney. p.12.

Movement 3: The Telephone Game

(Blood Sausage)

Movement 3: The Telephone Game starts with an assumption, alike *Movement 2: Tag, You're It*.²⁸ The assumption is that two or more individuals have progressed in their interaction from the initial seeking stage and the ensuing ruckus represented by the second artwork. *Movement 3: The Telephone Game* is the next significant stage in the formulation of a romantic endeavour. It has a weight and solidity in its scale. It is heavy and physically awkward. It is materially analogue compared to the digitalism or electronic gameplay of the previous two movements. As Lost Kings sing in their pop-music hit of November 2016, 'why don't you put that fucking phone down?'²⁹ This game requires attention, negotiation and communication. It is a sausage comprised of passion, blood-lust, power and thrust, all wrapped up in a thin skin of pleasantries and contemplation.

Movement 3: The Telephone Game consists of two chairs, an elongated chess table, an array of Lumina porcelain chess pieces, and a suspended light bar. The materiality of all these components speak to the concept of building, assisting and restricting the flow of communication. The chairs and table legs are F17 black-coat Form-ply, an industrial-grade resin-coated timber used to formwork concrete

²⁸ *The Telephone Game* is also known as *Chinese Whispers* amongst many other location-specific names around the world. As a child, I called the game *Chinese Whispers*, however I acknowledge that this is now considered to be politically incorrect due to racial stereotyping and discriminatory references. See Blackmore, S. J. (1999), *The meme machine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

²⁹ Lost Kings, Holmes, M, Leigh, P, Warren, E, Abisi, R, Shanholtz, N, Harris, S (2016), *Phone Down*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing Llc, Concord Music Publishing Llc, New York

foundations. The tabletop is a standard bedroom door measuring 80cm wide and 200cm long: the guardian of the bedroom, our inner sanctum, our most private and intimate space. Criss-crossing the door are lines of naked telephone copper pulled tight over small 1cm high wooden pegs. Telephone copper represents a physical connection between two or more people. An analogue form of telecommunication, a land-line connection requires an unbroken strand of material between phones to function. Unlike the gradients of reception signal for a mobile phone, a copper-connection has no grey areas. Communication is either good or bad, alive or dead. The chess pieces are cast from Lumina porcelain, a recently formulated, Australian manufactured clay, designed specifically for its translucency and luminosity. The light-bar that hangs above the table is reminiscent of the light above pool tables in bars, pubs and clubs worldwide – places where meetings were once made without the aid of mobile phones and internet data quotas.

Negotiating a relationship can be natural, but for many people, I expect it can be difficult and fraught. As Alice sits at the Mad Hatter's tea party during her adventures in Wonderland, she is on a journey that is equal parts self-discovery, personal growth, world-readiness and interpersonal skills development.³⁰ However, as an audience for *Movement 3: The Telephone Game*, we are not simply participants in the game being played out. We are implicit. We are the game. We are falling endlessly down the relationship rabbit hole, but am I Alice and are you the Queen of Hearts?³¹ What is your position? As we fight to survive

³⁰ See Carroll, L, and Gray, D.J. (ed.) (1971), *Alice in Wonderland*, [1st ed.], W. W. Norton, New York

³¹ See Carroll, L, and Gray, D.J. (ed.) (1971), *Alice in Wonderland*, [1st ed.]

within the self-regenerating system as in Steven Lisberger's 1982 sci-fi movie *TRON*, what is your winning strategy? Are you the hacker, or are you the 'heroic security program' in the interchangeable digital world of gladiatorial games?³² Are you the good guy, the bad guy, or the ambivalent? We may know the rules of the game, but do we choose to obey them? Printed cleanly on each end of the table is the only instruction: 'Play by the rules or play rough, decide for yourself when enough is enough'. Inside the game, we do not have an easy task. The throne chairs are not ergonomic and therefore uncomfortable to most bodies. Similarly, within the meat-market, only the stereotypically endorsed Adonis fits neatly into the hot-seat.

The table-top is a literally sticky satin black, every move of a piece requiring effort as the table-top grips the object like the sticky rim of a pool table in a grimy public bar renders your pint-glass immovable. Furthermore, as the game progresses, it becomes more and more confusing and harder and harder to remember which piece is which, and which pieces belong to which player. All the chess piece objects are homogeneously white. Although I am a white Australian – a second generation migrant with predominantly British ancestry – the whiteness that carries through not only the chess objects but the complete installation of four movements is not a racial, supremacist or colonial comment. I cannot avoid this connotation, but it is not my intention. Rather, the whiteness of the ceramic pieces and the greater installation is grounded in the history of white porcelain and its Asian ancestry.

³² Walt Disney, and Lisberger, S (1982), *Tron*, viewed 9 March 2018.
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084827/?ref=ttfc_fc_tt

Porcelain was already being used as long ago as 1500 B.C.E. in China, Japan and Korea.³³ In particular, it is the early Chosŏn period in Korea (1392-1599 C.E.) and the Dehua kilns of China's Fujian province in the sixteenth century from which I draw inspiration.³⁴ The white porcelains of these periods were imbued with Confucianist 'frugality and pragmatism' under the Korean monarch King Sejong the Great, who reigned from 1419-1450. In China, the purity of Dehua-ware lent itself to the creation of religious icons of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist subjects.³⁵ Aligning with these lineages, I utilise white porcelain in its pure unadulterated state. There is an honesty in the unadorned material. Among all the theatre of the four movements of my work, I do not attempt to hide each movement's materiality. We can easily see what they are: MDF, cardboard, house-paint, porcelain. Being honest to the materials is important; they do not pretend to be what they are not. As I bare my soul in my Grindr profile, I am honest about my own materiality. Are you? Where wars were once waged over the preciousness of porcelain, today it is cheap and mass-manufactured wares are easily replaceable. In the plug-and-play capable love/lust games of the meat-market, so are we.

The objects masquerading as chess pieces are loaded with a myriad of meanings: autobiographical and personal to me; biographical and personal to you. They are both queered and queering. In the love/lust games, we are the objects, occupants

³³ For an encyclopaedic history of porcelain see Atterbury, P (1982), *The History of porcelain*, Orbis, London

³⁴ Key texts discussing these periods include Blumenfeld, R. H. (2002), *Blanc de Chine: the great porcelain of Dehua*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley; Kim, J (2002), *White porcelain and punch'ŏng ware*, Yekyong Publishing, Seoul, Korea

³⁵ Gray, R, 'The Origins of Porcelain' in Atterbury, P (1982), *The History of porcelain*. p.21.

of what British artist Mark Leckey terms the ‘thin place’, a spot where the membrane between the actual and virtual worlds is especially leaky’ and things attest to more than one definition of reality.³⁶ German new media artist and writer, Hito Steyerl, argues that no object is ever simple, as objects are commodities containing their own auras of longing, agency, activity and power. She articulates: ‘a thing is never just something, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces is petrified’.³⁷ According to Neomaterialist theorist, Joshua Simon, objects are not subservient to humans; rather, humans occupy a world of objects.³⁸ In other words, objects are ‘undead’ beings with autonomy and agency.³⁹ Like Steyerl and Simon propose, they are as capable of communication with each other and with us as we are with them. This is an important consideration regarding the way I think of my object-making, and how my interpretation of these objects abound with their ‘constellations’ of interpretation, reinterpretation and/or misinterpretation by you and I alike. The porcelain objects that form the chess set are activated forces in the meaning-making of the game. Each object harbours an implicit and explicit meaning for me, as no doubt it will for you. Hence, as you fondle my pawn-lips, consider what secrets their closed-tight lips may keep. While I caress your drill-driver stallion, think about the holes you would like me to screw. Before you take a swipe at my gap-filling rook, try to anticipate the sticky situations you might need to dig yourself out of. And if your negotiations fail, I’ll knock the religion out of your milky bishop.⁴⁰

³⁶ Leckey, M, Malbert, R, Pettitt, C, Bluecoat Gallery & Nottingham Contemporary, et al. (2013), *The universal addressability of dumb things*, Hayward Publishing, London, p.5.

³⁷ Steyerl, H (2006), ‘The language of things’, *Transversal*, June, viewed 2 May 2018, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en>

³⁸ See Simon, J & Altman, A (2013), *Neomaterialism*, Sternberg Press, Berlin

³⁹ Davis, E, in Leckey, M, Malbert, R, Pettitt, C, Bluecoat Gallery & Nottingham Contemporary, et al. (2013), *The universal addressability of dumb things*, p.91

⁴⁰ Please note that domestic violence is not cool and I do not condone it.

As in a real Telephone Game, *Movement 3: The Telephone Game* has no defined winner: the original and final messages are often amusingly and frustratingly different. Messages will be mixed. The situation can become incomprehensible following only a few moves. As the game progresses, do you keep the communication lines open, do you keep the door ajar, do you play fair? Or do you shut the door and put down the phone? Cut your losses and cash in your chips? Only the dogged and faithful may progress to *Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato*. The rest of us find ourselves regurgitated back into the meat-market.

Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato

(The everyday supermarket sausage)

So, you're still in the game. Well done. But you haven't made it yet, as there is still effort to be made. You must continue to fight for my love as I must continue to fight for yours, through the ensuing trials and tribulations, joys and pleasures. The storm clouds and silver linings. The quality of this sausage may have dropped a little from boutique to supermarket, but plopped into your mouth just right, I'll still roll over the back of your tongue and down your throat just fine. This is a negotiation with longevity. Try not to gag, get those balls in the air and attempt to maintain them there.

Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato is no longer a game of lust as much as it has turned to the courts of love. Here, we must endeavour to enjoy each other time and time again, no longer specialities, though neither do we seek banality. We aim for the constancy and reassuring normalcy of the everyday. We have reached an elastic period of relationship-time where instantaneousness drags out and slow-motion is faster than a blink. Don't take your eyes off the game as the pair of tennis players struggle to keep their Bone China tennis balls in volley.

Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato is a synchronised dual-channel moving image work, consisting of a two minute 27 second video played on facing 24" monitors in a custom wall-mounted MDF display unit. While the complete artwork is outwardly the simplest of all the four movements in this project, it is undoubtedly the site of

my greatest challenges, personal growth and studio practice development. Aside from a test foray into making moving image works during Semester 1 of this year, I had not completed a video work before. During June of this year, I was deeply moved and inspired by Daniel Crooks's dual-channel video work, *Phantom Ride* (2016), exhibited in *The Return*, a group exhibition curated by Stevie Han for *Dark Mofo* 2018 in Hobart, Tasmania.⁴¹ Crooks's work resonated with complex simplicity, quiet disturbance and calm passion. There was a hopefulness in the rail-cart's constant progression along the spliced train tracks. Yet I interpreted a futility in the emptiness, abandonment or sterility of the landscapes the tracks traverse. Crooks's single-channel moving image work, *A Garden of Parallel Paths* (2012), is held in the Art Gallery of South Australia's permanent collection, so I had experienced the artist's work before, while living in Adelaide.⁴² While *Phantom Ride* depicts a multifaceted duality, *A Garden of Parallel Paths* depicts an endless linearity. Both moving image works evolve with a perpetual motion that alike a relationship never ceases to progress and/or regress, often simultaneously. The experience of Crooks's works, like mine, is that of time passing: of cause and consequence. The three works all share the concept that while time and its ramifications may be sped up, slowed down, warped and/or skewed, it cannot be stopped. The train tracks will degrade whether in use or abandoned, the garden of concrete alleyways will morph and change as people inhabit or depopulate, and relationships will spark, ignite and dwindle to embers as their fuel is consumed.

⁴¹ See Museum of Old and New Art (2018), *Dark Mofo 2018: Program*, viewed 14 June 2018. <https://darkmofo.net.au/2018-program/the-return/>

⁴² See Art Gallery of South Australia collection search, viewed 10 October 2018. <https://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/agsa/home/Collection/detail.jsp?accNo=20123MV1>

While negotiating *Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato*, I formed a relationship with the artwork, less allegorical and much more akin to a real-life romantic engagement. I realised during the work's production that for the work to succeed, I needed to trust and rely upon those around me as well as the work itself. Additionally, I needed to have faith in myself, that others saw me as someone worth assisting. Just as the tennis players in the video needed to believe in each other and anticipate the next cross-court exchange to keep their Bone China balls in volley, I found myself similarly negotiating a multitude of relationships with numerous people to ultimately inform a relationship with the work.

Therefore, as a viewer of *Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato*, consider yourself to inhabit my shoes. As you turn your head from right to left, from screen to screen, you are now the umpire. In consequence, you and I are implicated. We are both cogs inside the machines of the wider social constructs, systems and negotiations that we encounter on an everyday basis: life lived, relationships formed, lust made, lust spent, love won, and love lost. You and I are like the two players. On one hand we are ubiquitous or commonplace, plug-and-play capable, expendable. On the other, we are individual and unique, irreplaceable and special to many others around us. Still, not all of us have the skills to play this movement of the love/lust games.

Every smashed ball is the opportunity to tally the score, shake hands and walk away. Or, to try again. Get another ball back in play. With every glitch in our digital data-generational world, we can choose to go offline (for as long as we dare), or we can

get right back to swiping, tapping, texting and sexting. We must trust in ourselves before we can fully trust in another; we must believe in our imagination and communicate what we see before we can expect the same – or similar – in return. Nonetheless, compromises happen, help is sought, messes are swept up and the court is cleared for the next match – be it tomorrow, next week, next year or the next decade.

Farewell

(not a sausage, possibly a crash of cymbals or even a dong on a gong)

In the introduction to this exegesis, several questions were posed as the horizons of the project. Inside these boundaries, I have negotiated the spaces of the online hook-up/dating industry and the interactions within these applications (specifically Grindr) by turning the experiences into a series of metaphorical games. The interactions that I am willing to share include those that have the potential to form new and affirming relationships with a variety of outcomes – be it a casual encounter, a longer stint at communication, or a wholesome attempt at longevity. I am not willing to sacrifice my self-worth in the meantime, and I encourage my counterparts likewise. I make sense of my commodification within the meat-market as that of being a choice. It is a choice I choose to make, I admit, as an individual of first-world privilege and the resultant freedom. At the beginning of the project, my online meat was seasoned with the spice of vilification. I despised my body and my commodification in the marketplace. However, as the project progressed and I inhabited the space with gaiety and sincerity my experience of the plug-and-play capable gay love/lust games of the data generation transitioned to one of positivity. ‘As with any technological tool ... it is what the cyber-traveller does with it that can lead to positive or negative outcomes’.⁴³

⁴³ Cooper, A, and Griffin-Shelley, E (2002), ‘Gay men’s sexual stories: Getting it!’, in Murphy, D, and National Centre in HIV Social Research (Australia) (2004), *Cruising and connecting online: the use of internet chat sites by gay men in Sydney and Melbourne*, p.9.

As the relationship therapist, Esther Perel, states, ‘I look at affairs from a dual perspective: hurt and betrayal on one side, growth and self-discovery on the other – what it did to you, and what it meant for me.’⁴⁴ Over the course of this project, I have learned to view relationships and love in a similar fashion through the four movements of the project: *Movement 1: The Meetmarket*; *Movement 2: Tag, You’re It*; *Movement 3: The Telephone Game*; and *Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato*. I have employed parody, metaphor and light-heartedness to unpack my autobiographical baggage of romantic angst.

At the close of her TED talk, *Rethinking infidelity ... a talk for anyone who has ever loved*, Perel remarks: ‘and so when a couple comes to me ... I will often tell them this ... Your first marriage is over. Would you like to create a second one together?’⁴⁵ Between the dual screens of *Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato*, all our games come to an end. Irrespective of how long the cycle has taken, as we move away, as you put distance between the works and me, we all find ourselves back at the beginning. We need to make decide whether to re-engage and re-enter the meat-market or to find happiness in a-romantic solidarity. I am not ready to be single. I choose to re-enter. Would you like to play again too?

⁴⁴ Perel, E (2015), ‘Rethinking infidelity ... a talk for anyone who has ever loved’, *TED.com*, viewed 4 May 2018. https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_rethinking_infidelity_a_talk_for_anyone_who_has_ever_loved?language=en

⁴⁵ Perel, E (2015), ‘Rethinking infidelity ... a talk for anyone who has ever loved’, *TED.com*, viewed 4 May 2018.

Appendix A: Photographic documentation

Movement 1: The Meetmarket

(Plates 1 – 3)

Artist book, meat packaging, MDF, acrylic, lighting system, caster wheels, poster, labels, house paint

Dimensions variable

Movement 2: Tag, You're It

(Plates 4 – 7)

Imperial Porcelain, MDF, remote control vehicles, paper, card, timber, acrylic, lighting system, house paint

Dimensions variable

Movement 3: The Telephone Game

(Plates 8 – 12)

Lumina Porcelain, construction ply, bedroom door, telephone copper, lighting system, cushions, house paint

Dimensions variable

Movement 4: Hot Potato Hot Potato

(Plates 13 – 15)

Dual-channel video, MDF, house paint

55 x 90 x 166 cm; 2 minutes 27 seconds

Installation Statement

Once 'A' falls down the digital rabbit-hole, the rules of the game become stranger than the Mad Hatter's tea party. Meanwhile 'C' and 'B' battle it out for the finish-line and it's every 'D' for themselves as interpretation and mis-interpretation fool around with fragile balls.

Plug and play capable: Grinding through the gay love/lust games of the data generation... play by the rules or play rough. Decide for yourself when enough is enough.



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11



Plate 12

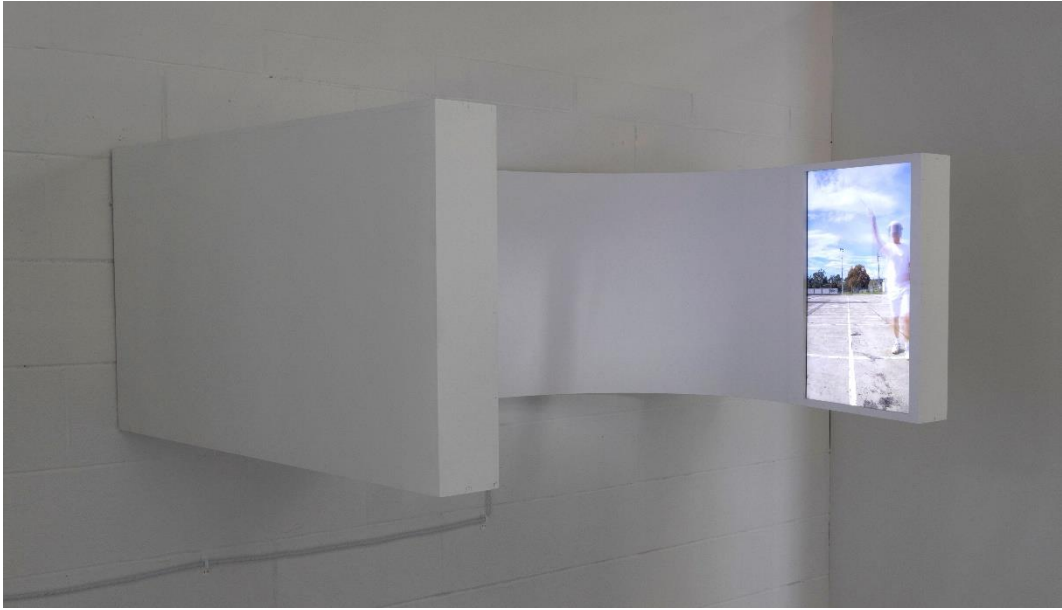


Plate 13

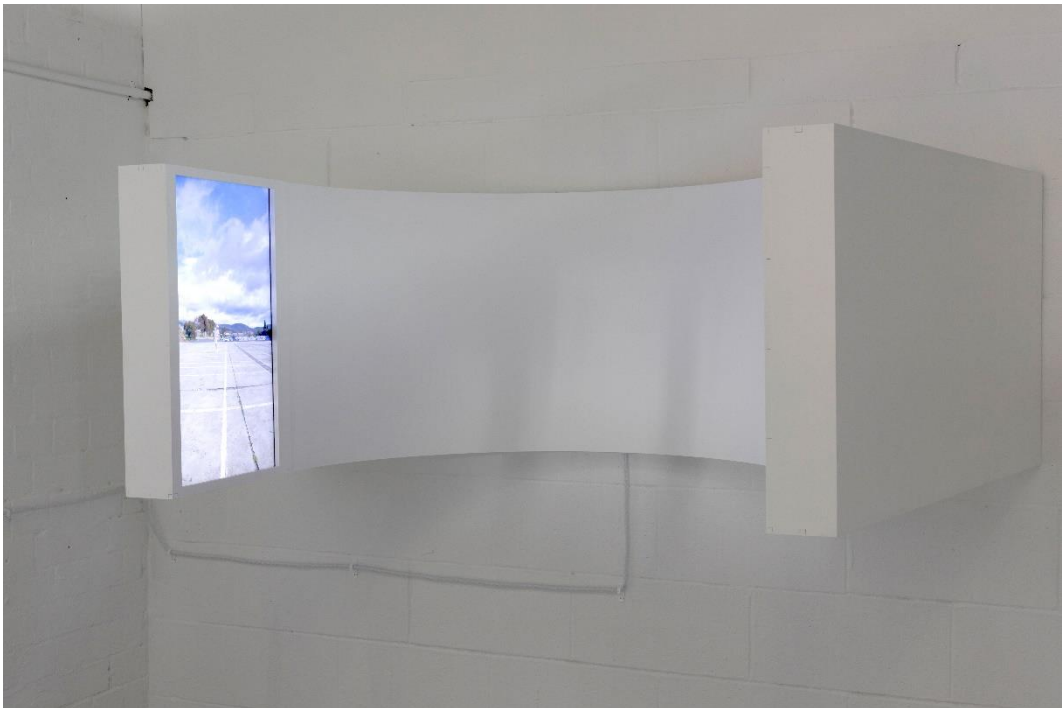


Plate 14



Plate 15

(Muse: Lee Booth)

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